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Fleet of Ships

Mediterranean Buttressed

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The U.S. Navy yesterday was assembling an unusually large fleet of warships in the Mediterranean as government officials increasingly speculated about possible military action in retaliation for the terrorist bombing that killed at least 230 U.S. servicemen or to preempt another attack.

The carrier USS Eisenhower and the battleship USS New Jersey headed a fleet of a dozen ships already near Lebanon, while the carriers USS Independence and USS John F. Kennedy were reported headed in that direction with their battle groups. Altogether, at least 29 Navy ships with about 300 aircraft could be in the area within a few days, administration officials said.

The dozen ships near Lebanon, meanwhile, were taking unusual precautions in the wake of intelligence reports of increasing danger from Syrian missiles, terrorist frogmen or other sources, officials said. The ships are staying farther offshore while moving constantly and keeping their best-armed combatants closest to the coast.

An administration source also said the United States has learned that what he described as members of a radical Moslem group recently carried rockets through east Beirut to positions from which they could reach U.S. Marines on land. He suggested that a commando raid, air strike or other military action might be taken as a preemptive move to forestall another terrorist attack.

A suicide car-bomb attack destroyed an Israeli military intelligence headquarters in southern Lebanon yesterday, killing at least 29 soldiers and 10 Arabs. Administration sources said they believe that the same "radical Shiite Moslem group" was responsible for yesterday's attack and the suicide truck-bomb attacks against French and U.S. military headquarters on Oct. 23.

Other administration sources said they know who planned the attack on the Marine peace-keeping force in Beirut and where the culprits can be found. Officials continued to discuss the possibility of retaliating for that attack, which killed more U.S. servicemen than had died in a single day since the Tet offensive of the Vietnam war.

Some administration officials, however, were said to be concerned about the diplomatic repercussions of any military action, particularly

while Lebanese leaders are holding national reconciliation talks in Geneva.

Although State Department officials have talked about "the deterrent effect" of retaliatory action, the department is understood to believe that a military reprisal could have effects harmful to long-range goals in Lebanon.

Specifically, the department's objections involve fears that an attack against Syrian-controlled portions of Lebanon could trigger a U.S.-Syrian confrontation and make even more difficult the task of getting Syria's cooperation for the withdrawal of all foreign forces from Lebanon.

In addition, the department is concerned that military action might draw a hostile reaction from British, French and Italian allies that would hamper the effectiveness of the multinational peace-keeping force.

There also is concern that retaliatory moves would increase the tendency of the Moslem factions in the Lebanese civil war to regard the United States as their enemy and add to anti-American sentiment throughout the Moslem world.

The Soviet news agency Tass yesterday warned that the United States was preparing to attack "national patriotic forces" in Lebanon. The Soviets have supplied Syria with sophisticated military equipment and several thousand military advisers since Israel invaded Lebanon more than a year ago.

Pentagon spokesmen, who attempted to squelch speculation about military action in Grenada shortly before the U.S. invasion there, declined to rule out possible action in Lebanon. At the same time, several spokesmen said the large fleet assembling in the Mediterranean does not necessarily reflect any unusual plans.

The aircraft carrier USS Independence, having aided in the Oct. 25 invasion of Grenada with its five accompanying ships, is to replace the Eisenhower, which is due to return home.

A five-ship amphibious task force carrying 1,800 Marines also is on its way to Lebanon after service in Grenada. The 22nd Marine Amphibious Unit is scheduled to replace the 24th, now in Beirut, later this month.

Both the Independence battle group and the Marine task force are not expected in the Mediterranean for three or four days, having left the Caribbean in midweek.

The carrier Kennedy, meanwhile, is steaming in the central Mediterranean with a cruiser, two frigates, a destroyer and a supply ship. The Kennedy was to take part in an exercise with Spanish forces called Crisex 83 before moving into the Indian Ocean.

Each carrier carries dozens of fighters and light bombers, but only a few E2C Hawkeye and EA6B Prowler intelligence planes, which scan the horizon for hostile intruders and can help manage air traffic. For that reason, having more than one carrier in the region can have military value, experts said yesterday.

Administration officials have talked openly of retaliation since the terrorist attacks almost two weeks ago that killed nearly 300 U.S. and French troops. Secretary of State George P. Shultz said recently that taking action against the perpetrators would have "a preventive effect" since the "people who did that might like to do it again."

Administration officials were particularly concerned about a possible threat to U.S. ships near Lebanon. The amphibious ships where the Marines live when not ashore have moved farther from the coast, forcing more ferrying by helicopter rather than by small boats, and warships with close-in antimissile weapons have been positioned between Lebanon and the less well-defended vessels.

Meanwhile, administration officials said Lebanese President Amin Gemayel almost certainly will not visit the United States soon, despite the adjournment of the Lebanese national reconciliation conference in Geneva until Nov. 14.

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